ANIMAL WELFARE AND AGRICULTURAL DRUG USE

Over the past year, concerns about farm animal welfare largely continued in the same vein as they had in the previous year, with standards enforced mostly through voluntary programs undertaken by industry and animal welfare organizations, rather than by government. These standards vary from certification program to certification program, with a good deal of difference in approaches and rigor. Standards created by industry are typically weaker than those developed by animal welfare advocacy groups. The stricter standards include Animal Welfare Certified, Certified Humane, and Global Animal Partnership.

The most significant recent legislative action affecting animal welfare was California Proposition 12, the Farm Animal Confinement Initiative, which was passed in November 2018. It establishes minimum space requirements based on square feet for calves raised for veal, breeding pigs, and egg-laying hens, and it bans the sale of veal from calves, pork from breeding pigs, and eggs from hens when the animals are confined to areas below minimum square-feet requirements.

Predictably, the measure was opposed by the California Egg Producers and the National Pork Producers, but surprisingly, animal welfare organizations were split: the Humane Society of the United States supported the initiative, calling it “the most transformational step forward of all time in regards to animal protections,” while PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) said Proposition 12 was a “regressive law that will keep hens in abhorrent conditions.” Time will tell who is correct. But already it’s clear that the issue resonates with the public: the measure was approved by voters 62 percent to 37 percent.

Quite related to standards for raising food animals is the rapid rise of diseases and infections that are resistant to antibiotics. It continues as one of the three slow-motion disasters threatening global public health, along with climate change and the rise in chronic noncommunicable diseases. Given societal concern about the development of antibiotic resistance in farm animals by virtue of antibiotic use to mask pathogenic housing conditions and for growth promotion, one can guardedly hope that the severe confinement systems may be somewhat mitigated. The UN Secretary General established an interagency working group to coordinate efforts to combat antimicrobial resistance (AMR). The group reported in late October 2018 on progress on policies to reduce antibiotic use in food animal production and plan to release a final report in 2019. All indications are that antibiotic use in animal production is still increasing, but varies greatly between countries, reflecting the effectiveness of policies and the influence of business commitments and consumer demand.

The U.S. poultry industry has responded to consumer demand more robustly than the swine and dairy industries, where the continued use of low-dose antibiotics for prophylaxis is a problem. Sanderson Farms, the third largest poultry producer, announced in November 2018 that it will stop using antibiotics of importance in human medicine on March 1, 2019 (gentamicin in its hatcheries and virginiamycin in its feed). Although yet to be realized, its competitors Purdue, Pilgrim’s Pride, and Tyson in pledging to end use of non-therapeutic antibiotics, this move is welcome as better late than never.

Commitments by suppliers have begun to appear in the data. In December 2018, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released the annual summary report of antibiotics sold or distributed in 2017 for use in food animals. The good news is that antimicrobial sales decreased by 33 percent between 2016 and 2017, and sales of medically important antimicrobials decreased by 43 percent from the peak year of 2015. The 2017 summary report also was the first to reflect data submitted after full implementation of Guidance for Industry (GFI) #213 prohibiting all production uses of medically important antibiotics (used for growth promotion, feed efficiency, and disease prophylaxis).

Reductions in sales of tetracyclines, the leading antibiotic in domestic sales at 3,535,701 kg in 2017, illustrates the improvement in antibiotic stewardship. Sales decreased by 40 percent from 2016 through 2017. Domestic critically important antimicrobials approved for use in industrial food animal production that are sold over the counter decreased from 8,000,326 kg to 271,280 kg from 2016 through 2017, a decrease of 96.6 percent, following full implementation of GCAW. These sales data are only a proxy for actual use in different food animal species, though. In the year ahead, actual animal use data will become available and promises to shed a spotlight on the differences between the poultry and the swine industries. Importantly, inappropriate use of antibiotics in food animal production is not the only risk for antibiotic resistance in the food supply. The Florida Phoenix reported that the Trump administration has approved spraying streptomycin and oxytetracycline on almost a half-million acres of Florida citrus in an effort to control the disease citrus greening. The antibiotics will have to be applied regularly over the years to keep the trees alive and producing fruit before they finally die of the disease. This will release enormous quantities of medically important antibiotics into the air, water, and soil.

As noted in previous Menus of Change reports, most of the largest U.S. restaurants and foodservice companies have committed to reducing or eliminating antibiotic use in their poultry supply chains, and several have already reached their goals, including KFC, which announced in January 2019 that 100 percent of its chicken is now raised without antibiotics important to human medicine. But few companies have committed to following suit in their beef supply, let alone other sources of animal-based protein, largely due to the expense of necessary animal welfare policies and the influence of business commitments and consumer demand. Given the size of California’s food economy, this will influence the rest of production agriculture.

Chefs and foodservice operators can play a vital role by sourcing their animal products from producers who raise their animals without the use of low-dose antibiotics for growth promotion or disease prevention. Fish and seafood should be included in any antibiotic reduction policies. Operators also need to carefully monitor progress in their supply chains and ask for regular updates on changes that suppliers are making to achieve long-term commitments to reduce antibiotic use and to improve overall animal welfare standards.

IN SUMMARY:

• Passage of California Proposition 12, the Farm Animal Confinement Initiative, established minimum space requirements for confined animals (veal crates, battery cages, gestation crates) and banned the sale of animal products raised in violation of these standards. Given the size of California’s food economy, this will influence the rest of production agriculture.

• The negative impact of antibiotic use in industrial food animal production on the global problem of antimicrobial resistance is now well-established, and reducing unnecessary antibiotic use is a priority for the UN and WHO.

• Internal and external pressures continue to push high-volume operators to reduce the use of medically important antibiotics in their supply chain. Much progress has been made in the poultry supply chain and more attention is being paid to the beef industry, though with little progress so far.